

Contributions.

INDIVIDUALISM VS. ECCLESIASTICISM.

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By individualism in this article is meant personal autonomy or independence and responsibility, by ecclesiasticism just the opposite, or the delegation or assumption of prerogatives over others.

In all purely human institutions whether social, business or political, there must be authoritative functions exercised by some acknowledged head, or power, and the constituency must be subject, or subservient to that head, otherwise there would be only confusion and anarchy. This same idea has also prevailed in most of the so-called churches of Christ ever since the close of the first century of the Christian era, but it was unauthorized, and is antagonistic to the foundation principle of the Christian religion. It has been the cause of all the tragedies, and horrors that have been perpetrated in the name of the Christian religion, and is the cause of a thousand warring denominations in the world to day, where there should be but one peaceful whole.

The critical reader of Scripture can find no authority for a great spiritual head of the church, nor for minor heads; there are divinely ordained ministers or servants, (but no lords or masters) whose duty it is to exercise all the emotional, educational and persuasive powers they possess, but not arbitrary authority. LOVE is the fundamental principle of divinely ordained church government. In a system bereft of all arbitrary power, love becomes the only potent force; if one cannot force another, one must appeal to sentiment, to the conscience, or to the heart if he would win others or gain the ascendancy over them. If one loves his neighbor as himself there is no occasion for any other power.

That love is the foundation principle by which the church of Christ is to be governed is so clearly revealed that it needs no lengthy argument to prove it; the principle is also very generally acknowledged, but very wretchedly applied in very many instances. The Brethren church stands out pre-eminent as an exponent of that principle and to her credit and glory it can be unreservedly maintained that she has so far been true to her profession; when men or churches have sent up to any District or National Conference any questions for authoritative action they have been respectfully informed that the church was not in that business, and so it ever must be if pure Gospel principles are to be maintained.

Our church is yet in her formative stage or period, and having stepped out, and away from the ecclesiasticism which obtains in other churches, she has to form a polity purely her own, in harmony with her motto, "THE BIBLE ONLY." It is very nice, and very easy to adopt a high sounding motto, but the shaping of a system of government in thorough harmony with it, is almost an untried task, and may be beset with apparent difficulties which have not yet been fully considered; if individual and equal rights are to be duly regarded, it may take very much less machinery to run our institution than churches generally are wont to have; where there is nothing to rule there is no occasion for rulers. While there may be nothing to rule, there is however much to do and to harness the diversified forces of the church system is unquestionably necessary, the want of which is felt among us. In a recent issue of the EVANGELIST, Brother Mackey outlined a system for the election and control of ministers. In a later issue, brother L. Allen Miller points out the necessity for a more permanent organization of our National Conference, and Brother Gnagey sets forth the importance of closer relationship between church and church. These together with others are very important questions and should be incorporated in a harmonious system, but great care should be taken not to destroy any personal prerogatives. Defining the functions of our conferences both District and National, will probably be the most difficult problem; this appears to the writer to be the pivot upon which the destiny of the Brethren church is hung. The fear and suspicion of ecclesiasticism has been so pronounced in the past that it has not been possible to adopt anything satisfactory to any considerable number; agitation comparison and repeated effort will however sooner or later, culminate in a feasible Gospel system; let us keep the question hot until the desired results are realized. A definition of the functions of the National Conference would no doubt also settle the question of a free or restricted press in the church. At present things are at "loose ends" the Editor scarcely knows whether he is Editor or not, and what is worse, he scarcely knows who to ask to find out. There should be something more definite upon this point than there is at present. The writer has heretofore given expression to his views upon the question of a comparatively "free rostrum" and has not changed his mind as to the correctness of the principle, but whether it can be satisfactorily applied is quite another question. If one man will have his way further than his say, there

can be no individualism. It is well to remember the latter point all along the line.

My leading reason (aside from the principle of love upon which the church of Christ is founded) for contending for personal autonomy is the fact that every one must appear before the bar of heaven in his or her own personality, and there give a strict account of every motive, word and action, hence the life preparatory to that event should be free from all arbitrary power, so that every one can live according to the dictates of conscience, a life of one's self. Conscience must be the motive power in every life to make every thought, word and action purely its own. It is the church's business to mould the conscience, which cannot be done by machinery, but must be done by the word and spirit, through the intellect and heart. Obedience to any ecclesiastical law can have no reward in it if it is not also obedience to one's own conscience, hence the importance of an unfettered individualism in matters of religion.

Members of the church of Christ ought to be like the trees in a fruitful orchard; each one withstand the storms and tempests in its own imputed strength, each one draw its own substance from the fountain of its life, and each one bring forth its own fruit of its kind, and all combine together to bring a rich harvest to the husbandmen, or as Paul compares the church to the human body; each member to perform its own functions, yet all working together in harmony with the directing head. In the church, Christ through the Holy Spirit is the head, and not some man or set of men, even if they should be recognized as such.

To the writer, the theory of an unfettered individualism seems correct, and if everything else in the world were in an ideal state, there might be no difficulty in applying it in its entirety, but inasmuch as we must adapt ourselves largely to things as we find them modifications, will no doubt be necessary. All that is herein contended for is that we ever keep in mind in the shaping of our polity, the fundamental principle (love) of the church of Christ.

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